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## The Imperfect Letter-Writer: Escaping the Advice Manuals

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## **THE IMPERFECT LETTER-WRITER: ESCAPING THE ADVICE MANUALS**

Letter-writing was a key conduit for communication in the eighteenth century and one that courted an increasingly broad range of participants of all ages and backgrounds, including tradesmen and poor families as well as aristocrats. Women were regularly included among them. For historians interested in the frameworks within which these women wrote, contemporary published advice literature has been an important source<sup>1</sup>. Yet this chapter contends that real-life manuscript letters present the best-fit sources for understanding epistolary practice. The often-found assumption that there was a straightforward relationship between professional advice and lived behaviour is simply wrong. The discussion that follows is based on research into women's uses of correspondence to engage with intellectual life<sup>2</sup>. Their letters show that eighteenth-century letter-writers were subject to a plurality of social and cultural influences when they put pen to paper. Reading advice was thus a practice that gave individuals scope to develop their own autonomy<sup>3</sup>.

### **THE ADVICE MANUAL**

Advice literature flourished in the long eighteenth century, propelled by demand from an increasingly literate consumer population and the money-hungry forces of production. Epistolary practice did not escape the printer's eye and

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<sup>1</sup> See E.T. Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* (Cambridge, 2005); and D. Raftery, *Women and Learning in English Writing, 1600-1900* (Dublin, 1997). See also V. Jones, « The Seductions of Conduct: Pleasure and Conduct Literature », in R. Porter and M.M. Roberts (eds), *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 108-132, for discussion of early feminist historians' reliance upon conduct literature as indicative of female repression.

<sup>2</sup> L. Hannan, « Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England, c.1650-1750 », *Literature & History*, 22 (2013), p. 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> See also A. Lawrence-Mathers and P. Hardman (eds), *Women and Writing, c.1340-c.1650: The Domestication of Print Culture* (Woodbridge, 2010).

countless volumes were produced advising the reader on how to make the best use of this form of communication, the most popular of these handbooks running into multiple editions. The numbers in which these volumes were sold suggests a diverse readership<sup>4</sup>. Certainly, booksellers were keen to market these volumes to as wide an audience as possible; and, for those manuals focusing on the skill of letter-writing, it was common to address anyone with an interest in learning. Examples included: « Now published for the helpe of such as are desirous to *learne to write Letters* »<sup>5</sup> or « proper for either Sex, and helpful to both »<sup>6</sup>. A mid-eighteenth-century publication explained why it could be enjoyed and used by a broad English readership: « we presume to call this Performance by the Name of *The Compleat Letter-Writer*; such a Number of Letters being inserted as to answer the Purpose almost of every Individual, from the Boy at School to the Secretary of State »<sup>7</sup>. The advertisement of these volumes to large sections of the population suggests that most authors and booksellers were sufficiently conscious of their profits to publicise their books to the widest possible readership. Considering the very real differences between the epistolary needs of « the Boy at School » and « the Secretary of State », this generic format does not seem ideally suited to the increasingly diverse population of eighteenth-century letter-writers.

Nevertheless, considering the potentially complex deliberations involved in putting pen to paper, it is unsurprising that books were printed and re-printed with guidelines for the keen but untutored letter-writer. Whilst the notion of conversing by pen might conjure images of light-hearted, flowing chatter on the page, in reality, conversation of an eloquent nature was considered a verbal talent

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<sup>4</sup> These publications increased notably from the late seventeenth century onwards: J. Raven, *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 180-205.

<sup>5</sup> W. Gent, *A Speedie Poste, with Certaine New Letters* (London, 1629), title-page.

<sup>6</sup> Anon., *A New Academy of Compliments: Or, the Compleat English Secretary* (London, 1748), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Anon., *Compleat Letter-Writer: Or, New and Polite English Secretary* (London, 1756), p. A2 (overleaf).

owned by few. Therefore, letter-writers of this period often felt the cultural pressure on their pens to « converse » in style, much as they hoped to deliver apposite and socially fluent remarks across the parlour or card table. No doubt, nervous correspondents sometimes turned to the pages of *Polite Epistolary Correspondence*<sup>8</sup> or *The Accomplished Letter-Writer*<sup>9</sup> to help them perform. Yet it remains very difficult to say with any certainty how strongly the prescriptions of popular books influenced the practice of individual letter-writers<sup>10</sup>. For one thing, letter-writers rarely acknowledged the use of a manual or guide. During research that consulted over thirty collections of correspondence and around 5,000 individual letters, no direct reference to the use of a letter-writing guide was found. Moreover, knowing that such books sat on the shelves of family libraries does not reveal how often they were read or how regularly their rules were applied.

This study is focused on epistolary culture, but its findings illuminate the importance of examining lived social practices instead of relying on the declarations found in contemporary cultural production. As Paula Fass has argued, the connections between cultural performance and society « have become obscure, riddled by theoretical language, rather than made instrumental through effective historical detail. »<sup>11</sup> The research presented here also supports Peter Mandler's view that « while our evidence is partial, some of it is better than the rest, and some better suited than the rest to addressing certain problems »<sup>12</sup>. Whilst many good studies by historians and literary scholars such as Clare Brant,

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<sup>8</sup> Anon., *Polite Epistolary Correspondence: A Collection of Letters, on the Most Instructive and Entertaining Subjects* (London, 1751).

<sup>9</sup> Anon., *The Accomplished Letter-Writer: Or, Universal Correspondent. Containing Familiar Letters on the Most Common Occasions in Life* (London, 1779).

<sup>10</sup> For relationships between prescription and practice, see too R. Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> P.S. Fass, « Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue », *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> P. Mandler, « The Problem with Cultural History », *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), p. 95; and responses in subsequent journal issues that year.

Vivien Jones and Susan Whyman have shown that advice literature should be treated with caution in discussions of social practice, the neat, quotable prescriptions contained in these manuals still provide tempting fodder for the scholar who wishes to sketch out prevailing cultural norms. To illuminate these disparities between prescription and practice, the argument here explores firstly some of the advice offered by manuals before moving on to consider the content of manuscript letters of the same period.

On reading and comparing advice books, the immediate impression is one of repetition. The same themes, topics, stylistic conventions and examples grace the pages of books published many decades apart. There are many examples of text being lifted from one publication and re-published in another – a cheerful plagiarism which was accepted by the convention of the day, but distinctly undermining the later volumes' claims to be current. Far from representing up-to-the-minute cultural conventions, manuals resorted to recycling material that was several decades old. For example, when comparing *The British Letter-Writer* (1760) with the *Accomplished Letter-Writer* (1779), a whole set of sample letters on tenant and master relations were either directly copied or very slightly paraphrased. Thus *The British Letter-Writer* instanced a letter from a tenant to a landlord excusing a late payment as follows:

Sir, My inability to comply with your reasonable Expectations, gives me the utmost Concern. I have sustained such heavy Losses, and met with such great Disappointments of late, that I must intrude another Quarter on your Goodness. Then whatever Shifts I am put to, you shall hear to more Satisfaction than at present, from, Sir, Your most humble Servant<sup>13</sup>.

*The Accomplished Letter-Writer*, published nearly twenty years later, offered this example:

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<sup>13</sup> Anon., *The British Letter-Writer: Or, Letter-Writer's Complete Instructor* (London, 1760), p. 4-5 [underlining added to indicate plagiarism].

Honoured Sir,

I am under great Concern, that I cannot at present answer your just Expectations. I have sustained such heavy Losses, and met with such great Disappointments of late, that I must intrude another Quarter on your Goodness. Then, whatever Shifts I am put to, you shall hear with more Satisfaction than at present, from, Sir, Your most humble Servant<sup>14</sup>.

The subsequent example, given in both volumes, is another letter from a tenant apologising to a landlord, but this time for a rural context. Again, *The Accomplished Letter-Writer* offers a letter which has a sentence identical to that of *The British Letter-Writer*<sup>15</sup>. Both manuals proceeded to offer an answer from the landlord, which, again, shared sentences in common<sup>16</sup>. Linda C. Mitchell has commented on this phenomenon, highlighting « that roughly 80 percent of the manuals [in her study] share 75 percent of their material in common, despite claims to originality printed in many of them. »<sup>17</sup> The scholar Pam Morris develops this point further, in her introduction to facsimile reproductions of conduct literature for women. Identifying this trend towards replicating texts, she comments: « conduct books have always tended to be intertextual in form, shamelessly paraphrasing and incorporating the content of earlier works »<sup>18</sup>. The problem here is that whilst imitation and compilation might have been culturally acceptable forms of writing, the manuals claimed to be new and of-the-moment when they were in fact recycling a previous generation's prescriptions<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Anon., *The Accomplished Letter-Writer* (London, 1779), p. 104-105.

<sup>15</sup> See Anon., *British Letter-Writer*, p. 5; and Anon., *Accomplished Letter-Writer*, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> L.C. Mitchell, « Entertainment and Instruction: Women's Roles in the English Epistolary Tradition », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66 (2003), p. 332.

<sup>18</sup> P. Morris (ed.), *Conduct Literature for Women, 1720-70* (London, 2004), Vol. 1, p. x.

<sup>19</sup> It was also not unknown for individuals to copy directly from their own received correspondence, passing off another's words as their own without attribution: for an example, see P.J. Corfield and C. Evans, *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of William Pattison, Thomas Amyot and Henry Crabb Robinson* (Stroud, 1996), p. 20; and letters 25, 26.

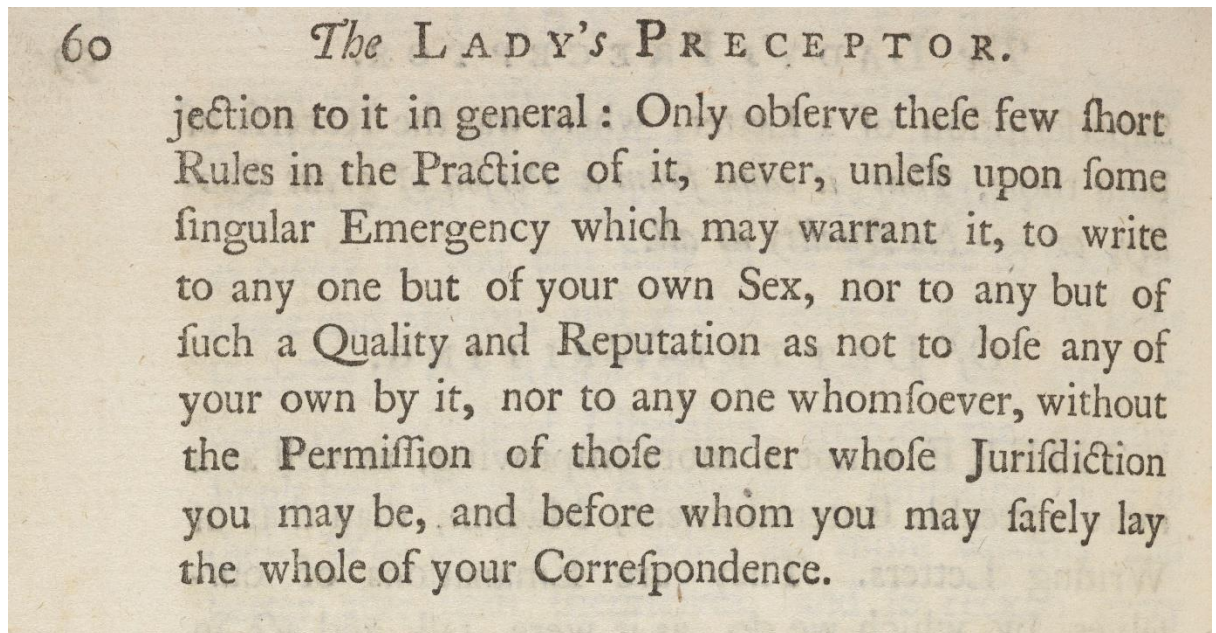


Fig. 1: Extract from *The Lady's Preceptor* (1743) by the Abbe d'Ancourt, giving the conservative advice, disregarded daily, that women should write only to correspondents of their own sex and social status.

The stark rules provided for proper behaviour make for compelling reading and the genre made women readers a key target of its prescriptions. For example, Abbé D'Ancourt's 1743 publication, *The Lady's Preceptor*, suggested that:

THERE is not a more improving, as well as a more agreeable Entertainment, Madam, than that of Writing Letters. They are Emanations of our selves, by which we do, as it were, talk and act in several Places at a time. Besides, they are of the utmost Advantage in our Intercourse with the World.

However, with these significant advantages in mind, a warning followed:

There are as great a Variety of Rules for Writing well, as for Talking well; the Ignorance of most of your Sex, therefore, in this Science, who generally are guilty of as many Faults as they pen Words, arises from their not caring to be at the pains required to excel in it<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> A. D'Ancourt, *The Lady's Perceptor: Or, a Letter to a Lady of Distinction upon politeness* (London, 1743), p. 59.

Moreover, D'Ancourt's promotion of the letter as a means to broaden and maintain a woman's network of influence was strongly mitigated by his final condition:

never, unless upon some singular Emergency which may warrant it, to write to any one but of your own Sex, nor to any but of such a Quality and Reputation as not to lose any of your own by it, nor to any one whomsoever, without the Permission of those under whose Jurisdiction you may be<sup>21</sup>.

This comment, however, did not by any means reflect the social reality of 1743. At this time, many women were active participants in social, political and commercial activities and interacted with broad networks of people, male and female. But the rule-providing remit of advice literature precluded such a diversified view of gender roles<sup>22</sup>.

The work of Eve Tavor Bannet has been influential in positioning letter-writing manuals as central to understanding actual letter-writing practices during the long eighteenth century<sup>23</sup>. Bannet states her case as follows:

Eighteenth-century letter manuals are of interest today both as conduct literature and as guides to the reading and interpretation of eighteenth-century letters. Considered as guides to what was in fact an extremely complex and highly intricate culture of letters, manuals change the way we read letters and interpret what they say<sup>24</sup>.

Bannet, therefore, posits the advice manual as a useful lens through which to view letter-writing and a critical tool in its interpretation. On the other hand, Clare

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> N. Phillips, *Women in Business, 1700-1850* (Woodbridge, 2006); H. Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760-1830* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Bannet, *Empire of Letters*.

<sup>24</sup> E.T. Bannet (ed.), *British and American Letter Manuals, 1680-1810* (London, 2008), p. xi.



Brant has argued that the categories of letter used in manuals did not map easily onto the range of letter types commonly used in ordinary people's correspondence. Manuals tended to use many more categories than the average letter-writer - these categories running down lengthy contents pages, lending weight to the notion that the book was both novel and comprehensive. But, as Brant also points out, there are gaps in the manuals' coverage on subjects such as « letters of political argument, religious controversy, scholarly exchange and scientific report »; and manuals avoided featuring letters containing either quarrels or expressions of condolence, despite these being common themes in real correspondence<sup>25</sup>.

Bannet takes the opposite view, stating that manuals gave models of *all* categories of letter, showing historians « the commonplaces considered proper to each », which contemporary letter-writers « were taught to repeat and vary »<sup>26</sup>. Bannet adds that these models also allow researchers to see where real letter-writers « departed » from the standard « commonplaces » and recognises these instances as significant. Yet, as a method, focusing on departures from the ideal or generic types of letter promoted by the manuals seems a dubious strategy. For a start, departures were rife in contemporary letter-writing. After all, correspondents drew on a diverse training, including reading family letters, absorbing parental guidance, or engaging in correspondence with relatives. To see only the manual and the letter as a relationship between prescript and practice is too narrow a view and one that is not borne out by the evidence of contemporary manuscript letters of this period.

## THE LETTERS THEMSELVES

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<sup>25</sup> C. Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Bannet, *British and American Letter Manuals*, p. xi.

Contemporary letter-writers treated the idea of epistolary best-practice with considerable latitude. For example, an exchange of letters between Yorkshire-based gentlewoman, Ann Worsley and her brother, Thomas Robinson, written in the 1730s revealed that, far from adhering to a strict stylistic framework, these correspondents openly discussed use of language in their letters. Ann Worsley regularly took the liberty of critiquing her brother's letters and their correspondence exhibited lengthy discussion about their choice of words and their meanings. Worsley poked fun at her brother's over-blown writing style, saying, « yt Line, I will raise her like a Meteor to y<sup>e</sup> skies, made me Laugh, was their ever anything more vain »<sup>27</sup>. Aside from the actual language used, Worsley's letters cautioned her brother against a marital match which she felt was unsuitable. The woman in question was often the subject of her brother's more grandiose statements, which re-doubled Worsley's criticism of his written style. Her brother's use of language reflected his ill-chosen love affair and, as such, had to be tempered: « she that has been yr Aurora Borealis this five years and you only an itinerant Star, y<sup>t</sup> has appeared so lately in this Hemisphere, the Curious indeed may with there [sic] Telescopes have discovered more than I ». Ann Worsley's next letter to her brother reiterated her concern that his letter-writing betrayed his ill-advised ardour. Having been begged for a prompt reply, she reprimanded him:

You insist upon my writeing as soon as possible, but what is it I do by it, but add fuell to y<sup>e</sup> flame, you write like an Orandatar [sic]<sup>28</sup> you are all inconsistent, you say tis a flame you would Cherish, & yet tis a flame yt may destroy you both, how then can I wish either of you, should feel the

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<sup>27</sup> For this and the following quotations, see West Yorkshire Archive Service, Newby Hall 2822/17, Ann Worsley to Thomas Robinson, c.June 1737.

<sup>28</sup> « Orandatar » or « Arendator » was derived from a Polish term for a rent and revenue collector - a lucrative occupation, reputed to lead to corruption.

sparks of it, them doubts of yrs would be sufficient ... to deter me from indeavouring to place you in her heart<sup>29</sup>.

For Ann Worsley, her brother's bouts of frenetic letter-writing were a sign of his irrational state of mind and it appeared that her advice was actively solicited by Robinson. She commented: « you say Mr Worsleys prudence & mine must save you, what do you mean, but whatever you mean, depend upon everything from us both, as yr real friends »<sup>30</sup>. Worsley used the initials of her maiden name to sign her letter to her brother, explaining: « Do but mind y<sup>e</sup> AR at y<sup>e</sup> Conclusion, how much does yt show my whole attention for you, and how much y<sup>e</sup> sister ». From Worsley's letters to her brother, it is impossible to discern the influence of the advice manual either in the sentiments expressed by her lovelorn brother or in Worsley's response to them. Worsley attributed his use of language to the state of his unchecked feelings<sup>31</sup>; and Robinson, it seems, chiefly sought his sister and her husband's views as a corrective.

Taking another case from the mid-eighteenth century, the letters of Jemima, Marchioness Grey, and her friends Mary Grey (later Gregory) and Catherine Talbot highlighted their attitudes toward prescribed forms of address<sup>32</sup>. The women had been childhood friends but in 1740, at the age of 17 years old, Jemima Grey married Philip Yorke and the couple went to live at Wrest Park in Bedfordshire. During the first years of this decade, Mary Grey and Catherine Talbot lived at Cuddesden in Oxfordshire<sup>33</sup> and a regular correspondence allowed

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<sup>29</sup> WYAS, NH 2822/19: Ann Worsley to Thomas Robinson, c.June 1737.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.* for this and the following quotation.

<sup>31</sup> But contrast with F. Bound, « Writing the Self? Love and the Letter in England, c.1660-1760 », *Literature & History*, 11 (2002), p. 1-19, for an alternate view.

<sup>32</sup> Catherine Talbot (1721-1770) has received scholarly attention as a member of the Bluestocking circle, but her friends Jemima Grey (1723-1797) and Mary Grey (1719-1761) were less well known for their intellectual interests, both in their own time and thereafter. See L. Hannan, « Women, Letter-Writing and the Life of the Mind in England, c.1650-1750 » (unpub. PhD., London University, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> In the household of the Rev. Thomas Secker: see J. Gregory, « Secker, Thomas (1693–1768) », *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: on-line.

the women to keep in touch. As Jemima Grey had inherited the title, Marchioness, Mary Grey had felt bound to address her as « Lady » in their first exchange, but clearly felt uneasy with this formality:

Will you allow me to lay aside that form in my letters which I will not allow my self out of them & permit me to forget all your Titels [sic] & adres my self to dear Jem: a wonderfull familiar stile surely to use to a Marchioness but the Friend will I hope excuse it to the Peeress. Why then not claim that protection, by invoking Her in the Name; why? because I am very odd perhaps; but it appears to me quite useless where; if the expressions are but tolerably just, every one will sufficiently shew it, without advertising it at the top of the Paper: You are so good you would have excused me perhaps without this long Defence, but I could not have excused my self.<sup>34</sup>

Here Mary Grey distinguished between paying the appropriate respect toward her titled friend and enjoying the familiarity of an informal address. She posed the idea that, whilst the Marchioness and « Jem » were one and the same, they were distinct facets, which could be separated for the sake of the continuation of a relaxed epistolary style. In the event, the women continued to address one another as they had always done<sup>35</sup>. On 14 October 1742, Catherine Talbot echoed these sentiments, writing to Jemima Grey to confess her disappointment at her own reliance on dreary formal phrases: « When You see Lady Mary tell her how sick I am of all the formal stupid Letters I write her, in answer to Most kind & Agreeable Ones, & let her attribute it to the impossibility of expressing what I most strongly feel. Tis this impossibility abridges my Conclusion into the dull form of Faithfully Yours C. Talbot »<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Bedfordshire & Luton Archive, Lucas Papers, L 30/9/53/2: Mary Grey to Jemima Grey, 11 Aug. 1740.

<sup>35</sup> The transcription of Jemima Grey's return correspondence to Mary Grey, penned by Amabel (Grey's eldest daughter), made no mention of Jemima Grey's response on the question of address. However, the transcribed letters may well have been abridged.

<sup>36</sup> BLA, LP, Letter 447: Catherine Talbot to Jemima Grey, 14 Oct. 1742 [modern transcript].

Similarly, for the Worsleys, the formalities of address proved a talking point. Ann Worsley wrote on 19 January 1739 to her sister-in-law, Frances Robinson, highlighting that a change in Robinson's status ought to trigger a change in address: « my dear Sister (I must no longer call you Miss Fanny, or y<sup>e</sup> more familiar plain Fanny, since you are become a Mother) »<sup>37</sup>. In the event, no such change was made and the two women continued addressing each other as they always had done.

Examples such as these show that letter-writers openly discussed the value or otherwise of epistolary conventions and frequently chose to reject prescribed models in favour of their own formulations. This qualitative analysis of manuscript letters can be compared with quantitative socio-linguistic studies of early modern correspondence. Minna Nevala, for example, has examined seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters with a focus on the forms of address used in the « subscriptions » (written inside the letter) and « superscriptions » (written on the outside of the letter)<sup>38</sup>. Matters of address were heavily covered by contemporary advice literature and are, to this day, the most formalised aspects of a written communication. Nevala's research found that, in familiar letters, « individual preferences seem to have existed in direct address in letters between mutually close correspondents, like family members and friends »<sup>39</sup>. This view is certainly confirmed by a reading of the correspondence of the Worsley and Robinson families and of the Grey circle.

In 1737, Ann Worsley questioned common epistolary practice more generally. In a letter to her brother she decreed a ban on certain words, which were used formulaically in letters: « I am disappointed I havnt a Letter from you

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<sup>37</sup> WYAS, NH 2825/3: Ann Worsley to Frances Robinson, 19 Jan. 1739.

<sup>38</sup> Using the Corpus of Early English Correspondence. See also Tanskanen, « “Best Patterns” »; and S-K. Tanskanen, « “Proper to their Sex”: Letter-Writing Instruction in Henry Care's *The Female Secretary* », in M. Peikola, J. Skaffari and S-K. Tanskanen (eds), *Instructional Writing in English* (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 125-140.

<sup>39</sup> M. Nevala, *Address in Early Modern English Correspondence: Its Forms and Socio-Pragmatic Functions* (Helsinki, Société Néophilologique, 2004), p. 254.

to day in return to one of mine about y<sup>t</sup> Odious word respect, now I find I have a second of the same sort to prohibit which is duty, Oh frightfull formidable sound, ... let me hear no more such words I beg »<sup>40</sup>. Calling into question the ubiquitous epistolary practice of sending people your « respects », she declared that it was the word « respect » itself with which she felt most uncomfortable. Worsley explained that when her husband had: « bid me return a great deal of yt respect you always send him, but I never could find a word to sute it, you must know them six Letters put together in yt manner, has always been my Aversion, it Conveys an Idea of Awe & distant regard yt takes off from Affection, friendship & familiarity »<sup>41</sup>.

This urge to undermine traditional formulas was also exhibited in the letter-writing of the Collier family who moved in the polite professional circles of Hastings in East Sussex. Mary and William Cranston came from a clerical family and Mary Cranston's marriage to John Collier, Mayor of Hastings, brought the Cranstons in touch with local notables in business and politics – Cranston ultimately deputising for Collier's business interests. However, despite the family's aspiring social standing, William Cranston took a whimsical approach to traditional formats in his letters to his sister. For example, in a letter from 1731 describing a recent trip, Cranston gave his service (or respects) in a playful manner:

and now as I am got to the End of my Journey so likewise am I to that of my Letter excepting to that necessary part of it, Love and Service which I would have distributed in manner and form following that is to say, attempt of some part of the former your self, other part to my Brother Cranston, other to my Cosin Betty other to my Cosin Tarpe att Thorpe and the Remainder to the Children share and share alike as to service after having given a good Lump of it to M<sup>r</sup> Collier I leave it to you to portion out whats

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<sup>40</sup> WYAS, NH 2822/17, Ann Worsley to Thomas Robinson, c.June 1737.

<sup>41</sup> WYAS, NH 2822/22: same to same, c.July 1737.

left & to give to whom you please provided it be not given to more than 100 people.<sup>42</sup>

This example shows that ordinary letter-writers, of no great literary pretensions, could use their correspondence to subvert highly traditional and prescribed epistolary forms. So, although conventions were frequently followed in letter-writing, when correspondents were sufficiently familiar, or so inclined, unconventional forms of address or styles of writing were readily adopted.

The evidence presented here suggests that advice manuals were not bought or used solely for their instructional value. The extraordinary claims of advice manuals as to their usefulness may have tempted the buyer to part with their money, but the simple act of purchase could neither guarantee an engrossed and daily perusal of a manual's pages, nor the assimilation of its rules. Also, there might have been more than one reason to read a manual. As Viven Jones has argued, this literature was read for pleasure as well as instruction and she has warned against a reading that sees the texts as simply « truth-bearing »<sup>43</sup>. Advice literature, it seems, was entertainment at least as much as it was instruction.

Cast an eye along any home bookshelf and the usual reference texts of dictionary, atlas and encyclopaedia can be found. However, use of these volumes is commonly limited and occasional rather than daily and routine. The long eighteenth century witnessed a series of ambitious reference work compilations, including most notably Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* (1690), John Harris' *Lexicon Technicum* (1704 and 1710) and Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (1728). These works were testaments to the intellectual project of categorising and containing bodies of knowledge in a period which saw a rapid

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<sup>42</sup> East Sussex Record Office, Sayer Papers, Say/1569: William Cranston to Mary Collier, c.1731.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, « Seductions of Conduct », p. 111-112.

reconfiguration of scientific understanding<sup>44</sup>. The range and number of reference books proliferated in the long eighteenth century and this genre came to include a diverse array of compiled texts, from town directories to almanacs; cookery books to gazetteers. Penelope J. Corfield has described this category of print culture as forming « the matrix of modern information systems » and « the core of any library collection »<sup>45</sup>. Many dictionaries and encyclopaedias of arts and sciences ran into multiple folio volumes and were for purchase by only the most wealthy. The slim, affordable advice manuals that have been considered here were, by contrast, within the reach of modest budgets. But whilst these volumes swiftly became a ubiquitous presence on eighteenth-century bookcases, letter-writers almost never described consulting them, whilst otherwise being voluble on their reading of printed material. This suggests that advice manuals, like other general reference books, were used occasionally and cannot be considered a key resource for readers seeking personal guidance.

To do justice to this examination of advice manuals as a primary source, reference should be made to scholarship on the letter-writing of the least literate in society: the working and trading classes. As Susan Whyman's *The Pen and the People* has shown, working people often put pen to paper to communicate with distant friends and relatives – using letter-writing to develop both their personal written literacy and their networks of contacts<sup>46</sup>. Given the many fewer years of schooling generally experienced by this section of society, it might be assumed that they were letter-writers in need of a letter manual. This view seems to be the premise of Frances Austin's study of a Cornish family's letter-writing in the late

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<sup>44</sup> For an encompassing discussion, see R. Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Dictionaries and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge, 2001); and, relevantly, A. Blair, « Reading Strategies for Coping with Information Overload, c.1550-1700 », *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 46 (2003), p. 11-23.

<sup>45</sup> P.J. Corfield, « Giving Directions to the Town: The Early Town Directories », *Urban History* (1984), p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> S. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 2009).



eighteenth century<sup>47</sup>. Austin's research maps the links between the Clift family's letters and a manual that was available to them: Fisher's *The Young Man's Companion* (first published 100 years earlier in 1681). Austin describes the Clift family as ordinary working people, although she recognises that their letters probably survived because of the elevation in social status that William Clift achieved in his lifetime. By indicating where phrasing used in the Clifts' letters echoed phrases in the manual, Austin shows that the address and signature lines of their letters demonstrated the strongest correlation. But finding continuity in those features really suggests only the most limited use of the manual's model letters and tells the historian little about the letter-writers' reliance on advice for the construction of their main message. Moreover, written forms of opening and salutation remain some of the least responsive to social change – even the increasingly outmoded form of « yours sincerely » written at the end of a letter has survived the revolution of email and its pervasively informal conventions. Nonetheless, Austin comments: « Wherever John got his wording – it may have been simple convention or tradition but note the accurate spelling – it seems that the Clifts did have recourse to model letters, and it is possible that these were used quite widely by people of their class. »<sup>48</sup>

Whyman, on the other hand, largely dismisses the relevance of manuals in her understanding of the epistolary literacy of working people. All her case studies show explicitly the central role of practice letter-writing with family and friends in forging children's abilities in the epistolary realm. Whilst children of different classes had different role models in their training, the key source of their education was the actual letters of their contemporaries. Whether the letter-writers were basic or eloquent in their communications, they wrote letters not

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<sup>47</sup> F. Austin, « Letter Writing in a Cornish Community in the 1790s », in D. Barton and N. Hall (eds), *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia, PA., 1999), p. 43-62.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

simply by following the rules of the genre, but by synthesising a multiplicity of influences: familial, social and educational; written and oral.

## AN INTERACTIVE PROCESS

Advice promulgated in manuals cannot be easily mapped onto epistolary practice and manuscript letters provide evidence of practices that educated the young in epistolary skills. It seems probable that letter-writers drew on a broad spectrum of source material when they put pen to paper. Conversations, other letter-writers, newspapers, periodicals, plays, novels, songs, sermons and the Bible all played a part. A letter-writer such as the seventeenth-century gentlewoman Dorothy Osborne, whose letters to future husband William Temple have been printed, was deeply influenced by her readings of French romances<sup>49</sup>. Similarly, for the more literary-minded, the printed letters of Madeleine de Scudéry<sup>50</sup> or Madame de Maintenon<sup>51</sup> could provide inspiration. In May 1668, the cultivated letter-writer Mary Evelyn responded to being addressed by a fellow correspondent as « Madam Balzac ». First she objected to the title because she did not value the French author, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac's written style<sup>52</sup>. Instead she suggested that:

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<sup>49</sup> See K. Parker (ed.), *Dorothy Osborne - Letters to Sir William Temple, 1652-1654: Observations on Love, Literature, Politics, and Religion* (Aldershot, 2002); C. Hintz, *An Audience of One: Dorothy Osborne's Letters to Sir William Temple, 1652-1654* (London, 2005); and idem, « A Second Reference to Marin le Roy de Gomberville's *Polexandre* in Dorothy Osborne's Letters », *Notes and Queries*, 46 (1999) , p. 339-340.

<sup>50</sup> J. Donawerth and J. Strongson (eds), *Madeleine de Scudéry: Selected Letters, Oration and Rhetorical Dialogues* (London, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Anon., *The Letters of Madam de Maintenon: And Other Eminent Persons in the Age of Louis XIV* (London, 1753); or K. P. Wormeley, *The Correspondence of Madame, Princess Palatine, Mother of the Regent; of Marie-Adélaïde de Savoie, Duchesse de Bourgogne; and of Madame de Maintenon, in Relation to Saint-Cyr* (London, 1899).

<sup>52</sup> Author and founding member of the Académie Française, Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (1597-1654) published his widely read *Lettres* in 1624.

Voiture seems to excel both in quicknesse of fancy easinesse of expression, and in a facile way of insinuating that he was not Ignorant of letters; an advantage the Court Ayre gives persons who converse with the world as well as books.<sup>53</sup>

In her lifetime, Mary Evelyn gave considerable thought to the letter as a space for critical and creative writing. Furthermore, this comment also reveals that she had engaged thoroughly with the examples of published letters that were available at the time and had considered their influence on culture and society.

Likewise, according to Trev Broughton's analysis of letters of advice sent between members of the Constable family in the early nineteenth century, the letters were not so much influenced by advice literature as they were themselves a form of advice literature<sup>54</sup>. In Ann Constable's didactic, maternal letters, « Concern is expressed *as* advice »<sup>55</sup>. This aspect of the letters might appear as the enactment of established social convention but, in reality, her suggestions were much more dynamic and responsive to personal relationships and familial contexts than the mere repetition of standard precepts. Like Konstantin Dierks' work on letters and the American middle class<sup>56</sup>, Broughton sees letters as an exercise of agency, although for her the context was provided by the framework of ritual. Either way, the process was dynamic. As Dierks argues:

We tend to think of social conformity as passive, but in the eighteenth century it was an active and fraught process because people could not

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<sup>53</sup> British Library Add MS 78539: Mary Evelyn to Ralph Bohun, 21 May c.1668. Vincent Voiture (1597-1648) was a French writer whose works such as *Les lettres de M. de Voiture* (Amsterdam, 1657) Evelyn would have read in the original French.

<sup>54</sup> T. Broughton, « Anxiety in Action: Letters of Advice between the Constables of East Bergholt in the Early Nineteenth Century », *Nineteenth Century Studies*, 27 (2015), pp. XX.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>56</sup> K. Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009).

presume their position in a world so endemic with geographical and social mobility<sup>57</sup>.

This way of thinking about the way letter-writers used, adapted, and dispensed with convention is a helpful one and positions the practice of letter-writing at the centre of that process.

Engagement with literature in letter-writing sometimes took the form of critical discussion but it could also appear as passages in the style of a particular published letter-writer or author. Brant has referred to this as « an aesthetic of imitation » and notes that it was particularly prevalent in the first half of the eighteenth century, before concerns about copyright came to the fore<sup>58</sup>. In the case of the diarist Sarah Cowper, as Anne Kugler has shown, passages from published works mingled – unattributed – with Cowper's own life-writing, a process by which Cowper re-shaped the texts she had read and asserted her own identity<sup>59</sup>. This example shows that resistant reading could also lead to rebellious writing.

## CONCLUSIONS

Epistolary culture encompassed a vast constellation of letters, from the functional to the literary, and its scope in form, purpose and style could not be reproduced on the pages of advice manuals. Letter-writers used the medium in ways that escaped the bonds of prescription: from the barely literate farmer's wife making herself understood in pen and ink, to the genteel housewife writing to male confidants without the knowledge or permission of her husband. For every

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> See A. Kugler, *Errant Plagiarist: The Life and Writing of Lady Sarah Cowper, 1644-1720* (Stanford, CA., 2002): the texts which Cowper drew upon and subverted were largely prescriptive, including sermons, conduct literature and periodicals.

prescribed norm in epistolary convention, there were letter-writers who deviated from its strictures.

Whilst it remains important to recognise the role of a whole range of influences in the construction of familiar correspondence, it is also vital to recognise letter-writers' autonomy within the frameworks of convention. In all cases, it is the letters themselves that provide the nearest view of early modern letter-writing as it was practised by men, women, workers, merchants or aristocrats, in town or in country.

By putting the advice manual centre stage, the result is scholarship that emphasises restrictive convention. The study of manuscript letters, on the other hand, leads the researcher to the opposite view. If, as Paula Fass has argued, scholars should take care not to lose the « significance of social location » in our understandings of cultural phenomena, then lived social histories must move into the foreground<sup>60</sup>.

To take one final example: when Buckinghamshire vicar's wife Jane Johnson wrote to her aunt, Rebecca Brompton, in 1756, she demonstrated the freedom offered by the letter as a written form:

I Dream'd last night that (Arachne like)<sup>61</sup> I was Metamorphosed into a spider as big as the full moon, & sat upon a Throne in the Center of a Web of my own spinning as Large as Lincolns-Inn-Fields. As soon as I awaked, I wonder'd what this extraordinary Dream should portend, & not having any Magician, Astrologer, Soothsayer, or Children to resort to, explain'd it my self, to signifie, that I must this day spin out of my Brains a Long Letter to Dear M<sup>rs</sup> Brompton<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> Fass, « Cultural History/Social History », p. 44.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson's reference to the mythical Arachne implied that too much pride in her work would lead to a fall: see S.E. Whyman, « Letter Writing and the Rise of the Novel: The Epistolary Literacy of Jane Johnson and Samuel Richardson », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 70 (2007), p. 594.

<sup>62</sup> Bodleian Library, MS Don c190, f. 13: Jane Johnson to Rebecca Brompton, 28 Feb. 1756.

For Johnson, the letter was a medium for self-exploration and meaningful exchange. Reading playful and imaginative letters such as these renders the advice manual an irrelevance. Whilst the style of Johnson's letters may have been unconventional, her use of the letter as a space for individualised communication was not.

Manuscript letters were the form of writing most used by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century men and women and the extant corpus of correspondence is daunting to the scholar wishing to encapsulate and codify their multiple meanings. By contrast, the advice manual beguiles its reader with the promise of a simple guide to a complex genre.

The corpus of letters upon which this research is based shows that childhood educations, family traditions, marital relationships and personal dispositions played a more important role in the character of women's letter-writing than did the wisdom offered by published guides<sup>63</sup>. By far the most fruitful primary source for understanding gender roles, women's writing, and the reasoning mind in this period are letters written by participants in that society. Here unalloyed convention is rarely to be found. Instead, all the diversity and eccentricity of human communication sings from the page.

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<sup>63</sup> See too S. Walker, « Prescription and Practice in the Visual Organization of Correspondence », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 66 (2003), p. 307-329.